



*Sheppard
Pratt*

The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

September 2001

◆ An employee who committed an outrageous act was referred to the EAP, but we are also considering termination. If we had some idea about the nature of her personal problems, we might not terminate her. How do we proceed? She is cooperating with the EAP.

◆ My employee frightened coworkers by “blowing up” over a small matter. I made an EAP referral and told him to enroll in anger management counseling. It’s easy to see that this is the problem, so why can’t I insist on it?

◆ After many years, I have decided to confront my employee’s attitude and work problems. Frankly, I’m losing the battle. He always has a defensive response to any confrontation. How do I make progress in dealing with this behavior?

It appears that you are willing to accommodate your employee and not act to terminate her if you discover that some health-related or other treatable personal problem explains her conduct. Since EAPs do not discuss the nature of employees’ personal problems, you may not learn the answer to this question unless your employee discloses it. You must depend upon the employee to take responsibility for requesting accommodation for health or other personal problems (in this case not getting terminated). Do not probe her for information about the nature of her personal problems. You could safely ask if there is anything she would like management to know before it finalizes its response to the incident. This would provide you with the opportunity to find out more without invading her privacy.

Although it appears your employee could use help in learning how to manage anger, his anger outburst does not make this conclusive. There could be many explanations for the outburst you witnessed. Only some of these explanations may require intervention or professional help. Your demand that he obtain anger management counseling is beyond your role as a supervisor and is an example of armchair diagnosing of conduct problems. However, referring your employee to the EAP because of his inappropriate anger response is appropriate. When supervisors direct employees to the type of help they think is needed for a personal problem, they risk problems getting worse even as they are provided evidence of their employee’s cooperation. What if a hangover, depression, drug withdrawal, or chronic pain caused your employee’s irritability? Anger management counseling alone may have little effect on such conditions.

The length of time associated with the problem behavior you describe contributes to the difficulty you experience in getting it to stop. Although some supervisors briefly seek guidance from EA professionals before making a referral, ongoing consultative help from the EAP may be necessary to help you remain focused and effective in what may be a long-term project to assist your employee. Many supervisors misunderstand the purpose of EAPs, thinking they are services only for troubled employees. They forget that if they face conflict and supervision problems they are just as entitled to EAP services as any other employee with a personal problem. The EA professional will not tell you what to do or take responsibility for your decisions, but will help you clarify your options, deal with ambivalence associated with conflict, and help you feel empowered to make effective decisions.

◆ I manage a group of night shift employees who have a lot of productivity problems. The night supervisor oversees the work, but she says employees don't take her seriously. What else can be done?

As a manager, you will not be able to evaluate employees adequately in the absence of a reliable assistant who contributes substantively to the performance evaluations of the employees supervised. So, you must share this management function. Without this direct contribution, employees will view the night supervisor as a peer without the ability or authority to judge their performance and influence the outcome of their evaluations. Making the night supervisor responsible for this additional duty will cause her to be perceived instantly as part of the management team. Be cautious however, supervisors who have not led or managed employees to this degree may have difficulty being willing to take on this responsibility now. To do so requires them to change their view of themselves from a "friend of the group" to a "manager who expects accountability" from those supervised.

◆ My employee wants to complain to my supervisor about a decision I made. Should I encourage him, talk him out of it, or what? How do I keep my credibility from being undermined if my supervisor reverses my decision?

Attempting to prevent your employee from speaking with your supervisor will likely compound your problem. You should speak to your supervisor ahead of time and provide an account of your employee's disagreement with your decision and his complaint. Ask that your supervisor first discuss the complaint with you after the meeting with your employee so that you have an opportunity to explain your decision. This is an important step in showing support for you, even if your supervisor reverses your decision later. Even if your decision was problematic and your supervisor is inclined to reverse it, request that you assume the responsibility of delivering this message to your employee. Avoid having your supervisor make the announcement in your absence. This will undermine your credibility. If your supervisor can't support your decision, at least you are in control of the message and have the option of switching your position based upon the merits of the argument.

Notes:

This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.

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